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THE PRACTICAL SIDE OF PREPARATION IN LITERATURE

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Not more than one student among twenty who enter college has a clear idea of the aims of the preparatory school in the study of literature. They regard this tribute exacted by the colleges as similar to the tribute of youths and maidens paid yearly to the Minotaur. It would seem that the first and most essential step in teaching literature would be to take students more into confidence and invite them to share the responsibility of attaining the desired ends. Many teachers ignore the fact that students are willing, even eager, to understand the rationale of this work, and to discuss, outside the classroom, methods of instruction, often revealing great discrimination in their satire of bad, and their praise of good, teaching. As long as the autocratic method of conducting preparatory work prevails, so long students will continue to be indifferent and rebellious, defeating the best efforts of their teachers. There is no need for an instructor to fear that the mantle of supposed infallibility will slip from her if she divulges any of the dark mysteries of her office. Young people respect a person who deals fairly with them, and respond with pride to an appeal for co-operation.

To carry out the principle of sharing the burden with the students, teachers should make simple statements of the ends gained by the study of literature, thus leading pupils to recognize its rightful place in education. For the young reader it is enough to know that literature is the collective term for all those written works which contain vivid records of human action and human appreciation. If the record is in metrical form, we call it poetry, if in unmetrical, we call it prose. The greatest and most enduring works are those which render natural yet noble action and emotion in the most concrete, the most picturesque terms. The general aim of the study of literature is to know truly what these records say; the best result is a

quickenings of the inner life of the reader. We supplement our own inadequate perceptions by the study of works of genius, and our spirits are stirred to activity and independence. The imagination, the reason, and the conscience are all trained by this pondering over recorded human experience. To know the beautiful from the ugly, the coherent from the incoherent, the right from the wrong, is what one gains from the study of literature; and the more constant the study, the more complete the knowledge. These sides may be illustrated by the teacher from *The Ancient Mariner*, which ought to be one of the first books read. The first reading should be given before any general discussion of the foregoing material is taken up, and then the boys and girls will be in a position to appreciate the points, brought out by the teacher's inductive questioning, of the values and interest to be found in the study of literature.

As soon as a student is possessed of an insight into the purposes of his work, he must be trained in the more mechanical side of the study of books. The college, not only in courses in literature, but also in other subjects, is quick to test a student's ability to handle a new book and to extract from it, without loss of time, the information which he desires. Half the difficulty of the task would be removed if explicit instructions were given early as to the value and importance of title-page, preface, introduction, table of contents, index, and bibliography. Students should be made to find their way about in new books by being given special topics which will lead them to make a thorough acquaintance with the various divisions of a volume. Such topics may be—to make a definition of an elegy by comparing the opinions expressed in Gummere's *Handbook of Poetics*, Alden's *English Verse*, and in the article on "Poetry" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, or to decide which of various editions of *Lycidas* is the best, as far as the arrangement of parts is concerned. Until a student is trained to examine in more or less detail these apparently insignificant, but really important, portions of a book he is not prepared to undertake college work.

Quite as necessary is instruction in the meaning of technical terms and abbreviations used in books. It cannot be a mistake to exhibit a folio, a quarto, and an octavo volume, and to explain that the names came from the fact that the printer's sheet of paper was

folded once to form a folio, twice for a quarto, and thrice for an octavo book, illustrating by practical demonstration with a piece of paper. The grotesque ignorance of students in the matter of signs and abbreviations might be relieved by giving them a table of those in common use.

Next, a student should know how to read a book intelligently when there are no notes attached. The overediting of schoolbooks has created among students a kind of mental paralysis; they are unable to work independently. Such a state of affairs is fatal to the career of a boy after he enters college and is made to work with books that are not annotated. Every student should be so thoroughly trained in the art of investigating that he will know immediately where to look for the information which he needs in the endeavor to understand certain passages in his text. To know the best sources of information is to know how to study with scholarly precision and self-reliance. If, in a volume, a reference is made to a fact of history, a student should know, in order to look for an elucidation of this, the names of the best histories of America, of England, and of the world, and so be able to turn at once, without waste of time, to an accepted authority. If a reference to a geographical spot is found, he should be prepared to look up the place on the map and fix upon his mind the special surroundings. If a reference to classical mythology enters, he should turn to the classical dictionary and find out the facts that are essential to a clear understanding of the allusion. If a famous person is mentioned, he should know where to turn in order to inform himself of the life-history of that person as recorded in trustworthy biographical dictionaries. If a new word is discovered in his text, he should turn at once to the dictionary and discover for himself the four essential facts in regard to it: derivation, pronunciation, meaning, and synonyms.

This problem of the dictionary is one of the most important ones confronting the teacher. It is not enough that a student look the word up for himself; his information must be tested; he must pronounce the word aloud, repeatedly. A list of new words may be kept, and students may be exercised each day in pronunciation and in definition, until they have thoroughly lost all self-consciousness. This should be true especially in regard to proper names and classical

names which, in their English form, are usually a stumbling-block in the path of the reader. In order to acquaint students with the relative merits and defects of the various dictionaries, special topics may be given, so that each student may take a single word and discover what information in regard to it is given in Webster's *Unabridged Dictionary*, in the *Century*, in *Worcester*, and in the most scholarly of all, *The New English Dictionary*, which has progressed as far as *S*. A word of caution ought perhaps to be added in regard to the scheme of pronunciation in this last-mentioned work. The British rather than the American standard is adopted, and, inasmuch as American speech, since our landing in 1607, has developed in a manner very unlike the British, we should adhere to the usage of our educated countrymen and not adopt *been* = *bean*, or other Britishisms which have no connection with our language. The tendency in many places today to imitate the English of London is the result of foolish ignorance of the true nature and history of growth in language. Each one of the British colonies has developed a characteristic speech and is no longer to be judged by British standards.

There is also definite advantage in training students to make use of the Appendix of Webster's *Dictionary*, where will be found pronouncing vocabularies of proper names, explanation of noted names in fiction, tables of phrases and abbreviations, and copious illustrations of important subjects in the arts and sciences.

No college teacher will deny that students are invariably unable to perform any of these feats for themselves. They are so accustomed to turn to the notes that they are helpless when confronted with the need of supplying themselves, by means of research, with the necessary information. In order to overcome the harm done by the dependence upon annotated editions, it is essential that students be made to verify the facts presented to them in the notes, and also to prepare an edition of some brief poem, such as *L'Allegro*, with their own annotations. Much compulsion will be necessary to make students perform the hard work involved in this sort of preparatory study, and the teachers' patience and fortitude will be very strongly taxed. However, if they realize that the training is for their lasting advantage, and means, for the future, greater ease in reading, they will slowly undertake the work.